

Dear Assistant Secretary Rose,

When the proposed DCYF Workforce Retention Grant was announced during the August 2022 ELAC meeting, we were excited that child care providers across Washington State would receive retention bonuses to thank them for staying the course during the COVID-19 pandemic. Community members have informed ELAC that the grant distribution process has not gone as anticipated, and a significant number of eligible child care staff will not receive part of the \$13 million earmarked for the field.

Application instructions were distributed in September 2022, and many sites applied for the grant anticipating that their attestation of the number of employees who met the grant criteria would receive it. No application instruction documentation, nor an earlier version of the grant information website, stated that MERIT staff data would be used in determining grant awards (see [WA Compass Step-by-Step Guide](#) and the [DCYF archived grant information web page](#)). As has been shared by DCYF staff during ELAC presentations, MERIT data is not up to date.

DCYF Retention Grant award emails were received by providers beginning Monday, November 21, 2022. We believe DCYF staff elected to change the requirements, at an unknown point, without notifying providers that they must be sure to scroll to the far right of the MERIT screen** to confirm each staff member. At the top of the list of staff is a box that includes the following statement*: *I have reviewed, updated, and confirmed all facility employment records*. There are no instructions or a definition of what it means to “confirm” an employee record.

Due to one unchecked box in MERIT, many staff were deemed ineligible, that are eligible, and were not included in the application numbers. Additionally, many were deemed eligible that should not have been, which includes substitutes and household members. Per providers, barriers to accurate data include the following:

MERIT facility administrators cannot confirm their own employment.

Staff description categories are not clear and are often open to interpretation (licensors give varying responses on how seasonal and substitute staff should be classified).

To gauge the impact on providers across Washington State, the Washington Childcare Centers Association (WCCA) conducted an informal online poll regarding the DCYF Retention Grant awards. Out of 114 responses, 70% have eligible employees who were not included in the grant award. Fifteen other centers collectively reported only 100-of-313 staff were deemed eligible. Based on this data and accompanying feedback, it appears the root of this problem lies in how confirming or verifying staff in MERIT was expected to be done, given the expectation was not clearly defined on the application.

If the intent of these funds is for childcare staff retention, it is not equitable to force providers to give funds to a select few, while excluding others. If providers return funds due to gross fund distribution inequity, the workforce retention grant may have the opposite effect and push staff, or providers, out of the field.

Our recommendation from ELAC advises DCYF to commit to finding additional funding by working with the legislature to ensure all eligible providers, as identified on individual grant applications, are awarded the retention bonus. Please advise how the department will address the inequitable Workforce Retention Grant distribution.

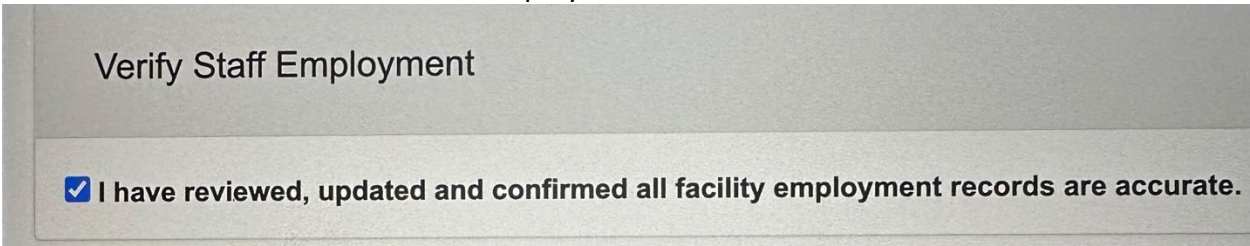
We are open to assisting the department in developing a strategy to solve this problem. We understand the Federal funds must be distributed by Dec. 31, 2022. Because time is of the essence, we ask that you respond within two business days. Thank you for all you do for the children, families, and providers of Washington State.

Sincerely,

The Early Learning Advisory Council

Cc: Allison Krutsinger, Director
Office of Public Affairs

* - located on the main screen above the employee list.



** - located outside of the viewable screen to the far right.

